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The Dandelion Page



Each year Americans spend millions on herbicides in an effort to keep their lawns and gardens free of weeds. The most notorious of these is an innocuous little herb known as dandelion. Every Spring the bright yellow flowers seem to appear everywhere, popping up overnight—flowers that soon transform into the delicate white feathery balls that children love to pick and blow, sending countless little parachutes to the wind and aiding the herb in the dispersal of its progeny.

As adults we often lose sight of the many small things that intrigued us in the Spring of youth. The same children who delighted in the little white balls just a decade ago, can now be found in the lawn and garden stores, searching through containers of deadly toxins for the perfect poison to irradiate what previously had delighted them so.



What is a **weed?** The definitions I like best are: 1) "the right plant growing in the wrong location," and 2) "an herb whose virtues have yet to be discovered." The virtues of the dandelion are many. The purpose of this page is to explore a few of these to increase our understanding of this much maligned and unjustly abused herb.



Dandelion is a member of the sunflower family. Its common name is derived from the French *dents de lion*, meaning "teeth of the lion," so named because of the shape of its leaves. Its botanical name, *Taraxacum officinalis*, comes from the Latin for "remedy for disorders." It is native to Europe and naturalized in North America.

Many consider dandelion a weed and a nuisance, but herbalists know the plant as one of the most nutrient-rich in the plant kingdom. The whole dandelion plant is edible—the flowers being used to make wine, the leaves boiled like spinach or added uncooked to salads, and the roots used as a vegetable or roasted and brewed for a coffee-like beverage.

The herb contains potassium, sodium, phosphorus and iron. The leaves are a richer source of vitamin A than carrots and contain some amounts of vitamins B, C and D.

Among herbalists dandelion is classified as a bitter herb with cool energy. It is valued mostly for its benefits for the urinary and glandular systems and as a liver and kidney tonic. Herbalists turn to dandelion for its ability to enhance the efficiency of the body's eliminative and detoxifying functions. It is a mild laxative and diuretic. It has traditionally been used as a tonic, blood purifier, for constipation, inflammatory skin conditions, joint pain, eczema and liver dysfunction, including liver conditions such as hepatitis and jaundice. As a tonic dandelion strengthens the kidneys and may be helpful for conditions such as water retention and high blood pressure. It does not deplete the body of potassium like many diuretics.

Herbalists usually use the root of the dandelion plant, which is dried and ground to a powder. This is often combined with other herbs with synergistic actions for maximum effectiveness. The root can also be used to make an herbal beverage. After washing to remove the dirt, it can be dried, chopped, and roasted in an oven like coffee beans and used for a delicious caffeine-free coffee substitute.

When dandelion leaves are to be consumed, one should select only the tender young leaves, as the larger and older leaves are usually too bitter. The raw leaves

may be added to salads to increase their nutritive value and flavor. When harvesting dandelion care should be used to avoid plants that have been treated with herbicides by our less enlightened neighbors.

Dandelion herb has traditionally been used for centuries. It is very safe and its benefits are many. In our high-tech world we often lose sight of the low-tech remedies that nature has provided. These are all around, but unless we know about them their virtues will be lost. Next time, instead of reaching for the toxic chemicals, reach for a spade, harvest this wonderful weed, and enjoy your greens along with your good health!

By Dr. Duane Weed

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